

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Signs of Hope

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TO DISPOSE FIRST of the one and perhaps only thing I feel to be quite regrettable about this really important book: its title.

When I first picked it up, a review copy on an editorial desk in Japan, I almost dismissed it as another popularization of the various schools of Buddhism. Then, recognizing the author's name—I had read some fine essays by Professor Jacobson on the relevancy of Buddhist thought to our contemporary predicament—I was relieved to find that this was not another book on Buddhism as a field of study for a theologically sophisticated academic elite either, but intended to hand us a “catalytic agent to speed up a reaction spreading rapidly through the contemporary world.”

This “reaction” is still that of a minority, albeit a growing and far from negligible one. For the British physicist and philosopher Lancelot Law Whyte it is even “an organic and an aesthetic metamorphosis suddenly becoming determinate in millions of men and women.”

If the title of this work had been “*Understanding by Buddhism*” it would have been ever so much fairer to its contents, for although one's grasp of Buddhist insights cannot be but deepened by a close reading of it, it is first of all a confrontation between Buddhism's supreme sanity and ourselves, both individually and collectively: as a culture going through transitions that are as inevitable, as hazardous as they are violently resisted. We are all part of a world “at peace” in which this

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“peace” is almost as cruel and destructive as war, and in which it is very painful to live. On a single page of one’s daily paper the tantalizing advertisements for super-luxurious condominiums, restaurants and fur coats stand juxtaposed with the frightful miseries of the homeless, the starving, the death of millions of children, with the extinction of whole species, and the ever-spreading epidemic of mindless violence in this most destructive of centuries. Jacobson bids us to submit to a relentless testing of our culture’s pre-suppositions and value systems against those of the Buddhist view of human life.

A triumphant technology grafted—and this on both sides of the curtain—on the obsolete illusion of “enlightened self interest” (the ultimate contradiction in terms by Buddhist standards) has already ruined the biosphere in less than half a century, probably irreversibly. The massive revolt against nature did not spare human nature, affected it to the point where it seems resigned to place its own survival as a species in jeopardy. In this unprecedented crisis, ever greater numbers of individuals and social groupings are awakening to the realization—in extremis—that our ego-dominated, culture-encapsulated economic, sociological, technological and ideological systems have become counterproductive. It would not be better if they were to be replaced by any other systems that are not rooted in the awareness of the inter-relatedness of all existences. This is a very ancient Buddhist insight into the Dharma, the Structure of Reality.

To continue clinging to the fatally outdated American dream of “enlightened self-interest,” the more so since this ‘self’ is no longer that of individuals as in classical capitalism, but that of anonymous gigantic and amoral corporations, makes our extinction more than probable. The spreading reaction against the suicidal addiction to things, acquisitions and hardware that still dominates our public life, is long overdue.

According to one of the most influential theorists of the emerging new paradigm, the physicist David Bohm, author of *The Implicate Order*, much of our predicament is due to “fragmentation,” a tendency he sees as being rooted as a universal in the human thought process and that is perhaps an attempt to achieve some semblance of security in the face of a baffling Whole by making its parts into falsely conceptualized “wholes,” of which each one then can be manipulated and exploited as if it were the independent unit it is not. The sovereign state is

a prime example of the false conceptualization of what is merely a fragment of humanity, as if it were an independent isolated whole.

The fallout of some Chernobyl or other does not respect "sovereign frontiers," nor does that of economical breakdown anywhere on the globe. As all action in conflict with the interrelatedness of reality, it is doomed to failure.

Bohm draws some interesting physio-psychological conclusions from modern physics, which contradicts the atavistic, mechanistic Newtonian model so radically. In modern physics reality is seen as a Field, a continuum that spreads through all of space, in which particles devoid of independent existence are merely forms in this Field. The resulting world view is not only compatible with the Buddhist views of interrelatedness, of the interdependent arising of all phenomena, rather it is the belated scientific confirmation of Nagarjuna's formulations of the second century. Bohm's provisional physio-psychological derivations from his view of fragmentation is similarly parallel to Buddhist teaching about the Self. The conceptualization of the indefinable "True Self" that produces the empirical ego, takes place in "the body, the brain, the nervous system, where the activity of the actual Self should be taking place."

The conceptualized empirical ego sets itself rigid boundaries. It is full of assumptions of what it is, of what it ought to be, what it requires for its well being and health. All disturbing feelings about the Self arise in this "conceptual ego," not in the actual Self. The conceptualized ego is fragmented from its content! It will defend itself against any attack, any implication of being in error with a fierceness called for only to defend dear life.

The fixing of boundaries that are too indiscriminate and too solid promotes further fragmentation of both the ego and of groups organized around it. A society organized, an environment parcelled, fragmented, according to such indiscriminate but strict boundaries becomes a jigsaw puzzle impossible to ever fit together again. Where the false conceptualizations have become so rigid that they become invulnerable to evidence and reason, "national interest" takes priority over everything including rationality, truth and life itself, the destruction of natural resources will continue unabatedly, the further proliferation of nuclear arms will continue.

The traditional assumption of Western civilization regarding the

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nature of power has always perceived it as flowing from a central autonomous source, be it emperor, pope, political party, nation state. Power was the capacity of a political unit to influence, to impose its will on other units without itself being affected in any essential respect (Raimond Aron). Realpolitik, this unilaterally wielded power devoid of sentiment and reckless of destruction, seems to be the only concept of power the West has ever understood and made into its guiding principle, so that every nation will regard itself as justified to use its most murderous weaponry as soon as its power over others is called in question. Individuals and social groups with this background of violence, for whom power is acquired from sources outside of themselves, ultimately from "God," have the tendency to organize themselves into large-scaled institutions that operate as the power banks from which to draw the units of power needed to save one from being as powerless as the rest. It is this Western conceptualization of power that created the modern corporation in its image, and spawned what Alfred North Whitehead speaks of as "The West's awesome attack on the life of the universe."

Amid the wreckage of this violently parochial heritage, now tottering, there is a contagious waking up to a reality which may recognize itself in what Northrop calls "the indifferentiated aesthetic continuum," that unstructured quality flowing deep in the inarticulated rhythms of our bodies, long before conceptualizing activity begins.

There is in every individual a sense of existence, a feeling for the qualitative reality of events, a sense of the ultimacy of undivided being, of which Venkata Ramanan, modern interpreter of Nagarjuna's thought, says: "setting the sense of the real free from its moorings in abstractions, constituted the most urgent mission of the farer on the Middle Way. Even the poorest man or woman, in the Buddhist worldview, has an enormous unexplored capacity for reacting to the qualitative reality of events, for returning to the un-conditioned oneness for which all retain a living thirst."

Buddhist meditation is the discipline unraveling the ego-dominated life by shifting the center of gravity to the unstructured quality of the passing Now. For Whitehead it is "the ultimate critique of all abstractions, the laying bare of the unexpressed pre-suppositions which underlie the belief of every finite human intellect."

For the Buddha the problem of suffering lies in the compulsive strategies the empirical ego employs to bring the transitoriness of life to a stop, to manipulate events towards preconceived ends, thereby dislodging all equivalents of "enlightened self-interest" from its privileged metaphysical ground. The overlay of a permanent self upon experience as it spontaneously happens, is the ultimate prison built on the concept of the I as an eternal self-substance received at birth.

This Buddhist view is the very opposite of the Aristotelian-Thomist view dominant in the West until quite recently, namely that the essential form of everything has been fixed from the beginning of time and that every "substance" has its own essential nature within itself, and hence cannot have become what it is by reason of its relations to others.

Nothing could be further from the Buddhist *Weltanschauung* than Descartes' fateful separation of body and mind, and his concept of the human and especially the animal body as "machines." Could the expression "human material," the blasphemy of chicken and pork factory-farm be laid at his doorstep?

The original discovery of the Buddha is that reality is a cosmic "social process," in the sense that no element of it is ever separate or of a self-established nature, and that each passing moment is an element in the undivided wholeness of what is constantly coming to be. Everything can only be identified by its *relation* to someone or something else.

In Northrop's, Whitehead's, Hartshorn's thoughts, as in Buddhist teaching, humanity is not "the center of creation" but "the place where life resonates most fully to the interconnectedness of life."

What is referred to as *Śūnyatā*, Emptiness, Absolute No-Thingness, is the pivotal concept of Buddhism.

Nishida Kitarō, father of Japanese philosophy, says of it, "that in moving from form to form the world constantly renews itself."

Śūnyatā, according to him, is the form of true relatedness between the forms of the world: the form of the formless. Kenneth Inada speaks of it as the "ongoing creative interrelatedness that holds the world together." It is inevitable that Buddhism in its radical pragmatism, its Wisdom that is Compassion, the Compassion that is Wisdom, speaks so compellingly to our contemporaries awakened from the death-dealing self-centered, world-destroying demands of a

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culture in entropy, which by the institutionalization of everyone alive, the denial of the mysterious experiment of nature that is every individual's existence, dehumanizes all life.

This, in short, as I understand it, is the main thrust of Nolan Pliny Jacobson's "catalytic agent." The book, however, also contains valuable essays on Hume and on Kierkegaard (whose thought notwithstanding radical differences in linguistics he sees as close to Buddhism), a brilliant study of the remarkable compatibility of American thinkers like William James, Emerson, Dewey, Hartshorn, Whitehead and many others with Buddhist insights, and even some pertinent remarks on symptoms of fundamentalist tendencies in American Buddhism that are comparable to the bibliolatry of parochial Christianity. It closes with a delightful chapter on the surviving training, in Japan, in those traditional arts which "generate a bodily feeling which is directly in touch with nature, engenders perceptions of the laws of nature in one's own body, an understanding which is qualitatively different from conceptual understanding, a 'control without control' and egoless action without the interposition of conscious effort or intention." In the practice of these traditional arts he sees, quite correctly, a counterweight against the ravages of urban life in a mechanized society.

There are of course some criticisms to be levelled: about an all too uncritical absolution of the Buddhist clergy from ever having been part of any power structure, about a style of writing which is not always an unmitigated literary joy, about the editorial structure of the book that could have been improved upon, but how vain are such cavils compared to Professor Jacobson's fulfilment of a bodhisattvic impulse, clearly motivated by the desire to bring light in darkness and to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings. Therefore this reader owes it and its author profound respect and gratitude. It is a book that must not only be read, but pondered.